Intentional Course Content

At the beginning of each semester, faculty often find themselves asking the question, to varying degrees, "What are the most important things that I should include in this course?" For some academic disciplines and professional preparation programs, this question is answered rather easily and directly in the form of accreditation standards and qualifying examinations. It is proposed, however, that for a vast majority of college courses, the decision about "what to cover" is left to the discretion of individual faculty members. Given that level of autonomy, what are the criteria that can or should be used to make this important instructional decision?

As a way of answering this question, consider the illustration of "The Three Boxes." The largest of the three boxes contains all of the knowledge and information that has been generated in your particular academic discipline. The contents of this box, and the size of the box, continue to grow and expand as new discoveries are made and research extends the boundaries and understandings of existing knowledge. As hard as we might try, there is no possible way for *any* faculty member to acquire all of the available knowledge in their academic discipline all of the time—or to remain fully abreast of every new theory, discovery, article, book, or conference presentation.

The second box, a bit smaller than the first, contains all of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that you *have acquired* and mastered within your discipline over the course of your career. This box also grows and expands as you read, attend conferences, and engage in scholarly pursuits.

"The Three Boxes"

 The third box is designed to hold the content of individual courses that you teach (i.e., the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that your students are expected to learn over the course of a semester). This box is smaller than the other two as you cannot possibly teach your students, within the context of one course, all of the information that you know individually or that is known collectively within your academic discipline. It is at this point that the real challenge arises: Picking and choosing instructional content and learning outcomes that will form the foundation for the learning experiences that comprise the courses that you teach.

Consider the courses that you are teaching this semester. Which of the following criteria do you consider relevant, or do you employ, when selecting course content?

- ❑ Course syllabi developed by faculty who previously taught this course
- ❑ A systematic review of the professional literature
- ❑ An intuitive feeling that the contents "just seems to make sense"
- ❑ Organizational structures and course content provided by textbook publishers
- ❑ Materials downloaded from the internet
- ❑ Content you were taught when you took this or a similar course
- ❑ Insights gained through conversations with valued colleagues
- ❑ Learning outcomes mandated through accreditation agencies
- ❑ The fact that it's what you have always done… and it always seems to work

Which of these reasons do you consider to be valid, reasonable, and defensible? These are discussions that faculty should be having on a regular basis. Additionally, the answers should become an integral part of the campus culture.

Some Questions to Ponder …

When we refer to the process of "covering material", what exactly does/should that mean?

When we hear a faculty member referring to the need to "cover" certain pieces of course content, does "covering content" mean a) reciting certain facts or pieces of information in front of the class, b) including certain elements of instructional content in a Power-Point slide, c) devoting a bullet point to a piece of information, d) assuring that certain concepts are included in the assigned reading, or e) all of the above? OK, that was a trick question. It is proposed that the correct answer to this question should be "none of the above." The concept of covering material should be more an issue of student learning than the teaching behavior of the faculty member. Granted, there is a direct connection between *teaching* and *learning*. At the same time, however, simply aiming for exposure (e.g., covering material) should never be the ultimate goal.

Of the content chosen for this course, which pieces of information are worthy of required memorization?

Has this ever happened to you? You enroll in a class in which the professor requires everyone to memorize long lists of facts. The test over this material simply requires you to recall the facts and mark an answer sheet. After completing the test, you hit your "Mental Delete Button" never to remember or use these "important" bits of information again. This phenomenon occurs more often than it should. Granted, in some disciplines, and on relatively rare occasions, there are key lists of information that are vital in day-to-day activity (e.g., based on frequency of use, the critical nature of immediate recall, the time element of knowing versus seeking). As faculty members, however, we must continually ask ourselves the question: Which pieces of information are really so vital that they should be memorized and which pieces of information can be categorized as 'I'll know where to find that if I need it?

Is there a concerted effort being made to integrate and reinforce classroom content, readings, and assignments?

Practically every course includes the components of classroom content/participation, assigned readings, and assignments (e.g., papers, tests, projects). It is critically important to do a regular analysis of the degree to which these three aspects of the course are integrated and connected. Sometimes, for example, reading assignments are made but not referenced or linked with other aspects of the course. The readings are treated as a free-standing activity with no intentional connection to the other components of the course. In this example, it would be helpful and reinforcing to make references to comments and illustrations made in the text during classroom discussions. This simple and intentional comment indicates to your students that reading the text is, in fact, an important aspect of learning in your courses. The same can be said of assignments. Allowing students to process and discuss the results of their research and investigations validates the importance of the assignment and strengthens their own learning as they discuss the results with their peers.

Is there a clear "relevance connection" established for course content ?

Learning often occurs in a classroom, but application generally takes place in settings beyond the classroom walls. Making course content relevant (i.e., personal, usable, applicable, significant) plays a dramatic role in enhancing the learning process. This finding is not meant to imply the that every fact, figure, concept, and principle learned in every class session or assigned reading must be immediately used by students that very day. At the same time, it is advantageous for faculty to make intentional connections between course content and external reference points in the world outside the classroom (e.g., personal stories, current events, quotes from practitioners in the field). Try making relevance connections: You will notice a dramatic difference in the responsiveness of your students. Do a relevance check today!